

Interview of video artist Otto Piene

Edited interview with artist Otto Piene (1928-2014), conducted by John G. Hanhardt for the Smithsonian American Art Museum, at artist's home in Groton, MA, May 8, 2014. [Learn more about the Nam June Paik Archive](#) at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

[JH]: Otto, its great being here in your home in Groton with you and Elizabeth Goldring [poet and senior fellow at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies]. You've had such an extraordinary career as an artist. You are a true visionary who grasped the potential of movement and performance to be the means to inform and transform art practice. Kinetic art, the *Lichtballett*, and the idea of collaboration, *Centerbeam*, the multi- and intermedia strategies that you pursued, all present themselves in your artwork, which explores time and space, whether it is the space of a gallery, or art museum, or out of doors, or even to the sky in your great environmental sky art pieces. The immersive environments that you have created, as with all the forms and materials you explored, were ahead of their time, and yet of their time. They captured the optimism and possibilities of our technology, of artists and scientists collaborating, and they foretold how installation art changed the art of the late twentieth century and become the dominant art practice of this new millennium.

As director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, founded by György Kepes, under your auspices from 1974 to 1993, you created a crucial incubator for artists, and it was the site of some of your great pieces. Earlier than that, of course, you co-founded Zero, an important avant-garde movement, or as you're quoted as saying, "point of view." And I'd like to say that this idea of "point of view" is one that shows your generosity and vision. Art is a means to give us new ways to see the world around us, to experience life, and to look to the present and the future. Having seen some of your light sculptures recently, I think they maintain an immediacy and vibrancy that is uncanny in its poetic power. You embody an inclusive vision that at the same time maintains a subtlety and beauty -- and I like to use that word to describe your work. There's absolute beauty in the work. It's conceptually grounded with poetic flights of imagination. And you've been identified with being on the cutting edge of development of the arts over the late twentieth century.

And so, I think you're the perfect person for me to begin a conversation with about Nam June Paik for the Nam June Paik Archive in Washington, D.C. I'm interested to learn from you about Nam June. I've talked about you and all that you encapsulate as an artist, and Nam June, in many ways, shared your belief in community. He shared a belief in collaboration and that idea of art being a point of view toward the world. He's an innovator, and like yourself, a charismatic figure, a catalyst, and a true artist. You worked with engineers and scientists, and Paik collaborated with Shuya Abe and others at the Bell Labs and also at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT. So, this introduction, I hope, sets the stage for a conversation. I thought I might begin by asking: when did you first hear about this person, Nam June Paik? Was it in Germany?

[OP]: It was in Germany, in Düsseldorf. He was brought there, among other people. I think others probably had some influence there, too. Jean-Pierre Wilhelm and what Paik called "22" [Galerie 22].

And he did this spectacular rabble-rousing piece destroying a piano. Destroying a piano in Germany is really, literally, considered a sin, [laughs] because music is holy, and piano music is extra holy, and to attack the piano is really a form of despicable aggression. And I think that's, in part, what Nam June had in mind. But on the other hand, he was also, in a certain way, of cultural, global importance because he was a musician, after all, originally. And he was educated in classical music, and he had great respect for all forms of music. So attacking a piano was really more than an act of aggression, it was also an act of respect. This was one of the forms he chose, maybe intuitively, maybe he thought about it a lot, to deal with this situation, and with the state of cultural music at the time he came to Germany. He came [to music] via Darmstadt, and towards [Karlheinz] Stockhausen and tendencies in modern music. But he was very, very much attracted by modern music.

[JH]: Did you know George Maciunas at that time?

[OP]: Yes.

[JH]: And Fluxus?

[OP]: Yes.

[JH]: Of which Nam June became a part. I mean, he came to Germany, to Darmstadt, he met John Cage -- and that whole process began. What was it about Germany at that time?

[OP]: Well, there were several tendencies in Germany. On the one hand, there were the kind of people who considered themselves existentialists and children of World War II with a very strong pessimistic mood determining what they thought, and what they liked, and what they passed on to others. And that was pretty much conventional by the time that we looked at the cultural scene in Düsseldorf or Cologne, particularly Cologne at the time. And we thought -- we, in this case, mostly means my friend Heinz Mack and I --

[JH]: Co-founders of Zero?

[OP]: Yes. We were bored by all this. It was repetitive. It was too easy.

[JH]: Which was repetitive?

[OP]: The negativism in post-war German culture. The mildest and most popular form being by, say, Heinrich Böll, who was a writer of the day. And in a certain way, I thought it was predictable. It was kind of the mood of the day. To be negative was fashionable.

[JH]: Did you see Fluxus as negative or optimistic?

[OP]: No, I saw Fluxus as really interesting and almost like anti-Zero, but productive. And I think that's probably still true.

[JH]: And how would you characterize that anti-Zero, in terms of aesthetic forms?

[OP]: I would think that anti-Zero would be something like elements of destruction as an art form, so to speak. That wasn't all that Fluxus did, but Fluxus was not, to my view, really offering alternatives. Fluxus was, in a certain way, a comment on the existing cultural scene.

[JH]: That's very interesting, because Nam June, in his vision, was transformative. I think he saw Fluxus as a kind of community, because here he was from Korea, in Germany, and there was a kind of instant community feel. But he really did see his work as much more constructive and empowering, because that's what video was as a communications and creative medium.

Tell me something about how people saw him as an Asian artist. I mean, he must have been a pretty unusual person, wasn't he?

[OP]: Many people saw him as, kind of, at best, you know, neo-Dada. And he certainly wasn't. He had heard of Dada, clearly, but I don't think that was his major influence or incentive. I think Paik was just --[he had] a very direct and a very, very healthy need to express himself in a way that wasn't what everybody else was doing. And he had a very good sense of how something original had to come from him, as well as others, in order to make it valuable. If it wasn't new and different, and also provocative in a certain way, then it wasn't all that interesting for him. I think he was totally right. And in a certain way --less provocative but certainly equally ambitious -- that was also part of the mission of Zero.

[JH]: Yes, absolutely.

[OP]: That's where we somehow met. No matter what the music, no matter what the visual art, no matter what the new media, that was a really, very strong impulse, some kind of burning desire to invent and present alternatives.

[JH]: Did you see his exhibition, in 1963 at the Galerie Parnass?

[OP]: Yes, I did. First of all, Parnass was a really powerful invention by the architect --

[JH]: Rolf Jährling.

[OP]: Yeah. The host of Parnass.

[JH]: Wonderful man. He came to Nam June's show at the Whitney.

[OP]: That would make sense. Yes. [laughter] He must have been old by that time.

To me, and it's also partly true for Fluxus, these were really very positive -- you might as well call them optimistic rumors initially, about how there was a different art than what we saw in the galleries and in the museums. And then, it became more and more articulated. It became more and more articulated, also, in part, because of these figures. I met Paik. And when I met Paik, I also met Charlotte [Moorman].

[JH]: Now what year was that? You met Charlotte at the same time in Germany?

[OP]: In Germany, only from a distance. I really met, and then very soon became very close friends --

[JH]: After they came to New York?

[OP]: That's right.

[JH]: But you went to that show at the Galerie Parnass in 1963?

[OP]: Yes, yeah.

[JH]: Can you give some impressions?

[OP]: Well, not too much in detail, but I do know that it really had a very strong, call it a revolutionary effect, on many, many young people and some of the artists.

[JH]: Oh, fantastic.

[OP]: The artists were kind of the main audience [laughs] of all of this. The artists were also the main audience of Paik.

And artists were the main audience of Zero. There weren't too many other people who could be brought into contact with this, what some people thought was nonsensical errings of the artists. It was a little bit like the first headline I ever got in a large review of my very first one-man show at [Galerie] Schmela. The headline was "Die Revolution der Zeichenlehrer" ["The Revolution of the Drawing Teacher"]. Because I wasn't the only one who taught as a matter of making a living -- Heinz Mack, some others. But among the artists who were free, independent -- so freier Künstler [free artist]-- we were what we were doing, Zeichenlehrer -- Teachers.

And that was the kiss of death to call us something like that in the face of the artists themselves. And on the other hand, in contrast to how some of the other artists, some of the other kinds of artists, at the time thought of themselves; they thought of themselves as revolutionary, as all sorts of really important things. Not Paik and not me, but a lot of the standard artists considered themselves revolutionary. Well, who laughs last laughs best. Okay?

[JH]: [laughs] Exactly. Did you see Paik as a performance artist?

[OP]: No, no, no. Paik was a musician.

[JH]: So when did you first have the sense that he was going to do -- I mean, that Galerie Parnass show had his prepared televisions. But was it only after he came to New York that you began to have a sense of him as a visionary, in terms of this new art form, this new medium of video?

[OP]: First of all, I was one of the first video artists, myself.

[JH]: Say something about that....

[OP]: Well, I did [work] with Aldo Tambellini, my other very good friend in New York City.

[JH]: Yes. But that was in the late sixties. Your work with Aldo with *Black Gate* -- *Proliferation of the Sun*. But Paik was actually working with the television in '63.

[OP]: Yeah. Paik also said to me that his experience of my *Lichtballett* turned him, Paik, into a visual artist. Until then he was a musician, a composer, a sound artist, et cetera, et cetera. So Paik said I turned him into a visual artist, so that's also what made me somewhat aware of how playing the *Lichtballett* wasn't only a totally remote and private enterprise. If it had a strong influence on someone like Paik, there must be some force through that.

[JH]: Did he see your *Lichtballett* in Germany?

[OP]: Yeah. No, wait a minute. Yes, in Germany.

[JH]: I'm just trying to figure out this chronology.

[OP]: In Germany, at -- what's her name?

[JH]: Mary Bauermeister?

[OP]: Mary Bauermeister's house.

[JH]: Atelier, in Cologne.

So, this is fascinating. So it was the *Lichtballett* in Cologne at Mary Bauermeister where Nam June was being shown. Nam June was someone you saw as this Korean-born artist engaged in the ideas of music and new sound. And then, [through] his exposure to your work, [he] began to see the possibilities of light and media and materials and --

[OP]: -- and space.

[JH]: And space.

I've often seen a connection between Paik's destruction, if you will, of the piano, which was in every bürgerliche living room -- and the television.

[OP]: We all were educated [in] music on the piano.

[JH]: Exactly.

[OP]: We all had Klavierschule.

[JH]: Exactly, Klavierschule. And then there was the television, which was entering the living room. So I always, you know, saw this interesting connection between this performative piano and turning the television into something you could perform.

And I think that sort of idea was placed on the ground in the Galerie Parnass show. But it's very interesting, from what you're saying, the *Lichtballett*, the idea of making it become more than about television, was inspired because you were a community of artists, different artists showing two artists' work.

[OP]: Yes, with the night exhibitions. It was a night exhibition -- in Gladbacher Straße 69, where we did the *Abendausstellungen*. And they're fairly well-documented photographically. And who was there in the first row? Paik.

[JH]: Ah. Where are those photographs?

[OP]: I have them somewhere.

[JH]: And what year was that?

[OP]: Well, it's easy to establish. [1957]

And the other -- the *Abendaustellungen* -- were very important to get people together, mostly artists, but then also, increasingly, some people from the Düsseldorf bürger who were interested in art. Some of them were interested in art they hadn't seen before. And the other place was Jean-Pierre Wilhelm. Jean-Pierre Wilhelm had -- was a meeting point of many different artists and not Zero.

Also the first Americans came into Düsseldorf via Galerie 22.

Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, he didn't only introduce people to what was going on in Paris, like [Jean] Fautrier in Paris came to Düsseldorf -- but also the first Americans. Robert Rauschenberg and --

[JH]: Well, the great acquisition of that period of American art went to major German museums and private collectors' hands.

[OP]: That also began to have to do with the *documenta*. Then there was the *documenta* -- I think, it was the second *documenta* --

[JH]: '70, '72?

[JH]: But mentioning the *documenta*, I'd also like to mention *Light Cocoon*, the piece from '65? I mean that idea, the transmission of light. To me, that becomes really interesting to look at in terms of Paik and the cathode ray tube and the idea of the television. Would you agree?

[OP]: Oh, very much so. The television, as it first appeared, it was fabulously bourgeois.
[laughs]

[JH]: Exactly. That's my point. With the piano, totally bourgeois. That's fantastic you said that.

[OP]: The theater of the time, and the musicals of the time, and the dance of the time, the social dancing -- was fantastically, what?

[JH]: Bourgeois.

[OP]: Bourgeois, of course, bourgeois, and very cautious.

[JH]: Very cautious. Genau.

[laughter]

[OP]: Sehr vorsicht.

[JH]: Genau. [laughs] Exactly.

[laughter]

[JH]: That's a wonderful observation. I mean, really. That's something I've always looked for, someone to say that about television then in Germany -- and Paik's approach to it. So, Paik -- now tell me about his move to New York. He became a real powerhouse in New York, you know, [with the] influence of the Rockefeller Foundation, and WNET/TV Lab, and then WGBH --

[OP]: WGBH, in particular, yeah.

[JH]: -- the Video Commune -- the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. You're doing your *Centerbeam*. I mean there's this extraordinary period -- you're working with Charlotte Moorman, who was identified with Nam June. Was Paik different when he came to the United States than the Paik that you met in Germany?

[OP]: I think, the U.S., you know, as it had on me, had its effect on others. Particularly, New York had a very liberating effect in many, many ways. I mean, if you think of our friend Stockhausen, for instance, he was a fabulous musician, and he was a fabulous composer, but he was also very formal. And it's kind of hard to say it nowadays because he was very, very revolutionary, and so was his mentor, Herbert Eimert. But compared to what was going on in New York City -- that was really very vollhergezogen. Whereas in New York there were all these wild guys running around. That also came out of jazz, for instance.

[JH]: Exactly.

[OP]: And jazz was one of the major things to experience in New York City, that you could hear live jazz that we only had heard of, that only existed on records, and the records weren't necessarily going deeply into the origins.

[JH]: It's the great American art form. Jazz, I mean, just changed everything. You could hear it.

[OP]: Yes, yes. And that had an enormously inviting effect. When I was first in the United States, I was invited to teach at the University of Pennsylvania.

And part of what I was doing while in Philadelphia was going to New York and see what was going on in New York. And one thing I did in New York, I was going to the jazz places and all, not all, but some of the people I had admired -- because I heard the records, the one or the other concert -- they were right there, you know, playing the piano in bars, et cetera. That was an amazing contrast to the habits of hearing music and admiring music in Germany.

[JH]: Otto, you've hit upon something that's really very important. That the sort of condition of the environment and the context -- I mean, you had someone like Stockhausen, this radical innovator, but all happening within this container.

[OP]: Yes. Right. [laughs]

[JH]: Westdeutsche Rundfunk.

You know, it's a particular institutional paradigm.

[OP]: Yes, and well supported.

[JH]: Yes. Huge support.

But that was it. It wasn't happening with that feeling of immediacy.

[OP]: That's right.

[JH]: At the neighborhood bar.

[OP]: And that was really fantastic.

[JH]: Did you spend a lot of time with Nam June at this period? When he came over?

[OP]: Well, increasingly, we did. We had both been in New York maybe for two months when we discovered that these two guys, Paik and Charlotte, were also in New York. From then on, we saw each other fairly frequently.

[JH]: Did you see "Originale," the performance of Stockhausen in New York?

[OP]: I did not see it in New York, no. But I knew about it, I heard about it.

Nan and I lived in -- one thing that happened to me in New York, I met Nan.

[JH]: Nan Rosenthal?

[OP]: Yes. And because of her, I met hundreds of people and so on and so forth.

[JH]: She was doing what at that time?

[OP]: She was a journalist. Then she was a journalist writing for newspapers.

[JH]: On art.

[OP]: Not only on art, no. She was a journalist.

[JH]: That's right. They write on everything.

[OP]: That's right.

[laughter]

[JH]: That's great. It's wonderful.

[OP]: And I did teach her how to spell quite a few things -- but then she also had some friends who were jazz musicians, such as -- Aldo [Tambellini] had some friends who were jazz musicians. I met Aldo because he came to the Howard Wise Gallery, where we had the first Zero, three-man exhibition. And he then realized that he had something in common, so I would see him --

[JH]: I was very dear friend of Howard Wise, knew him very well. And here he had Paik and Charlotte, he was doing all this. Tell me a bit about that time in the gallery. How did that feel? And how was it different from what was happening again in Germany?

[OP]: Well, New York gallery life was highly organized. You know, Schmela's gallery was about this size. Okay?

[JH]: Small room.

[OP]: Small room. And when it was full, it was full.

[JH]: Whose gallery is this?

[OP]: [Galerie] Schmela, in Düsseldorf. And compared to that -- you know, we were invited to the Howard Wise Gallery via London.

[JH]: Via what?

[OP]: Via London.

[JH]: Oh. What does that mean?

[OP]: That the connection was made through Douglas MacAgy. And Douglas MacAgy was a cultural figurehead, but a museum director in several places in New York City, and he had been the head of the -- what -- university art department. I don't remember right now, but it was important. And Howard called me at home in Düsseldorf.

And he told me that he would like to be part of a new gallery they had in New York City. And would I have a show there?

[JH]: Wow.

[OP]: Just like that. Like the artist's dream, you know, someday the telephone rings and somebody is going to change their life. And Howard -- there was one before him, a collector from the west coast, and then came Howard. And the first thing he did, he sent money. [laughs]

[JH]: Fantastic.

Did you meet Nam June at Howard's, too? I mean, because he was showing that *TV as a Creative Medium* and -- say some more about Howard Wise and also about Aldo Tambellini.

[OP]: Aldo was a wild man. He still is kind of a wild man.

[JH]: Totally, totally.

[OP]: But he was European, after all, and from the start, we took a real liking to each other. And Aldo's life changed after New York, when I invited him to become a fellow [at the] Center for Advanced Visual Studies. And that's where he lives today. He still lives in Cambridge. And he had some artist group around him, and his wife, Elsa Tambellini, ran a theater performance program, and the performance program became part of the Gate Theater.

[JH]: Yeah, in New York.

[OP]: And Aldo organized some exhibition in some small gallery on Third Avenue, and that was the first time that we exhibited together. And thereafter, he was kind of moving closer to the Howard Wise Gallery, because there were real social contrasts there. Aldo was a real Lower East Side troublemaker, but fanatically dedicated to his work, his art, his artist colleagues, and so on, so forth. And through him, I really learned a lot about the Lower East Side. For about a year I had a studio on the Lower East Side myself, and, you know, painted there -- I began *Lichtballett* there, and things like that. So Aldo was European, because he was born in the U.S. and his mother, [who was] Italian, took him home to Italy five minutes before the beginning of World War II. So he lived through World War II in -- well, an Italian city -- what's its name? [Lucca] On the Italian west coast.

[JH]: Well, we can find out. You talk a lot about Aldo.

[OP]: We did a lot together.

[JH]: Now, I'm interested to hear -- what did you think of Paik? Did you feel close to him?

[OP]: I did get closer to Paik because of Charlotte. Because Paik and Charlotte, they were mostly together in those days. And they came to events and they came to -- actually, also to our apartment on 60th Street. And Aldo really felt like a social revolutionary. He hated the Upper East Side but couldn't live without it, or something like that.

[JH]: You didn't feel that way about Paik, though.

[OP]: No.

[JH]: Paik was somebody who would swim in anything --

[OP]: That's right.

[JH]: -- to make it work.

[OP]: I never looked at Paik as a part of any kind of society. He was just Paik.

[JH]: Oh, interesting.

[OP]: I knew nothing about his background, the rich parents and the Cadillacs and stuff like that. I knew nothing about that. Quite frankly, I also wasn't really curious about it because he was such an interesting guy who had a lot to say without being a social revolutionary.

[JH]: Did you see him as an artist revolutionary?

[OP]: Artist revolutionary. They were not political. In a certain way, they would have been worse being political, but the political part was entirely evident in the art, and their ways and beliefs as artists. They were not like the Greeks who would set asses [spelled phonetically] on fire, or something like that. None of that. And there was the whole very strong black element because of jazz. They all loved jazz, and that was kind of a connecting element.

[JH]: How was he at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, Paik?

[OP]: He took absolutely no time to kind of form his circle of friends, who were at the center, or right outside the center, or connected to the center; and pursuing new ideas such as, what was it at the time, the first one -- the first really new ideas? The long-distance traffic, what was it called? You know it, too.

[JH]: Are you talking about interactive?

[OP]: Yes. Interactive, a piece that's based on the telephone originally.

[JH]: Like the Video Commune at WGBH.

[OP]: Yeah, stuff like that. Yes, it's not exactly the word --

[JH]: But he had friends there at the center, inside and outside, he used it.

[OP]: Yes, yes. And he kind of formed a circle of people who did that. And Aldo had -- became a real activist. He was really skillful in discovering his friends, and discovering his --

[JH]: Paik or Aldo?

[OP]: Aldo. Paik, anyway, he was a little different.

[JH]: How?

[OP]: Paik attracted people -- without working on it very hard. Paik just attracted people by being Paik. Whereas Aldo was a -- he was really an activist in quite a few ways. And, also, successfully, so he had founts of friends at MIT, and they did performances, and they did exhibitions and so on and so forth.

[JH]: I'm interested in a question here, Otto. In the conversation we're having now about Paik, you keep returning to Aldo. I mean do you see him in your mind as somehow a distinction, were you closer to Aldo, more sympathetic to him?

[OP]: I think I was closer to Aldo because he lived through World War II in -- what's the town, the Italian town, on the west -- on the upper west coast? Historic town.

[JH]: We'll find it.

[OP]: Yes, yes. And he had real, very tense war experiences. And in that respect, we had [this] in common. I saw a lot of war as a child soldier, and Aldo saw a lot of war because he lived with his mother in northern Italy.

[JH]: So you had that shared, common wartime experience.

[OP]: Yeah. And we were really close in age. Aldo I think is what, he's a year or two younger than I was. That's very close. Whereas Paik was, should I say, much younger?

[JH]: Yeah, he was younger. How did you see Paik change over the years? Did you notice a change in him from the artist you met in Germany, the one in New York, and MIT, and then through the eighties? And then he became very successful.

[OP]: That's one thing that changed. But I mean, he was never not successful. He came from Germany, and there I think he was part of the musicians that were quite consciously good and successful musicians. Mary Bauermeister, she was a magnet there, to quite a few of them. And they were, indeed, used to considerable success when they had concerts. People came and saw them, and so forth.

[JH]: It was sort of those happenings, performances, concerts, where different people would do different things and there'd be a large audience... They were filmed, they became media events.

[OP]: And there were other nationalities. David Tudor.

[JH]: Yes. And they were moving around Europe.

[OP]: Yeah, from England, and Scotland, and Scandinavia.

[JH]: They were touring. They were showing and performing all over. So you were saying there was a kind of visibility to the musicians. Or that there wasn't -- that was different from the visual artists.

[OP]: There was this element that I and several of their friends had -- of internationality, and [it was] something we wanted, and were hungry for because of the insulation during World War II, and the insulation because we were German. That was an element at that time that was certainly still alive. And the internationality was lived internationality, when I had this new circle of friends, there were five people or something like that. One of them was Charlotte, one of them was Frank --

[JH]: Frank? Charlotte's partner? Frank Pileggi?

[OP]: Yeah. Charlotte's husband.

[JH]: I'm just trying to get to the hub, you know, of what Paik meant to people, you know? We all talk about his career, he achieved this, he did this performance, he did this video tape --

[OP]: Well, he was one carrier of the international banner. I mean, we didn't know Japanese, we didn't know Koreans, we didn't know --

[JH]: Exactly, he was very unusual.

[OP]: Yes. And he spoke English, although badly, and he --

[JH]: He spoke German badly.

[OP]: Yes. Charlotte said, "Paik speaks seven languages. Badly." [laughs]

[JH]: Exactly. What did you think of their relationship?

[OP]: I think it was a very good relationship, but I do believe Charlotte that it wasn't really sexual. It may have been at times and a little, but nothing -- it was not a basically sexual relationship. Besides the fact that Charlotte was married, she was -- was she Catholic? I think she was Catholic.

[JH]: Well, she loved Frank. And Frank loved her. I mean, you know he died of a broken heart essentially, after she died. I mean, they were so close.

[OP]: Yes, yes. So this wasn't like a popularity, like a stunt --

[JH]: Well, she was a means for him. I mean, she performed, they made the TV Cello, and all these things, and she was a trooper. Remember the New York Avant Garde Festival?

[OP]: Yes.

[JH]: Year after year.

[OP]: Fantastic. Charlotte was the motor there.

[JH]: Absolutely, she was the one that did it. Single-handedly.

[OP]: Yes, she was amazing.

[JH]: I still think that that's one of the great achievements.

[OP]: Yes, she was really amazing. Charlotte, in her own way, was really brilliant.

She had real ideas about what to do, adventurously, about art, that didn't exist. It was kind of exotic and fascinating. When Charlotte appeared with her red dress, she was really a phenomenon.

[JH]: Yeah, she was charismatic. When I did buy the Paik show in '82 at the Whitney, she used my office as a dressing room. And, she would dress up in a gown, go down to the gallery, perform for the public. She just loved the public. She would play the cello.

[OP]: Now I think that Charlotte as a musician was best when she flew on my inflatables.

[JH]: I remember that, the *Sky Art* piece. Unbelievable.

[OP]: And played the cello. She was never as good a musician as when she did that, that was exactly the kind of adrenaline that happened then, that kept her alive for many years.

It was amazing. And then when I was a director -- after all, I was a director there for twenty years -- I invited Charlotte and Paik; they became fellows. And I don't know how much Paik cared -- he may have cared -- but Charlotte was ecstatic that she was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Visual at MIT.

[JH]: Oh, I can just hear her voice. "John." [laughter] "I'm a fellow." Absolutely, it was great; it was recognition. It meant an enormous amount. By the way, that was one of the important things of what you did at the Center, was recognizing these artists and bringing the prestige of your institution behind them.

[OP]: Yeah, yes. And then, I think she did some kind of a festival while they were in residence at the center, Paik and Charlotte. They did the whole set of plays, Paik and Charlotte, the wet plays and the dry plays and the almost-undressing plays, with the cello, without the cello, and it was fascinating at the center. It was so alien to what the center was supposed to be doing. And at the same time, the students were really fascinated by this creature, Charlotte, that they'd never seen. And you know, Paik was kind of an exotic creature, too. The people at MIT hadn't necessarily seen a person like Paik, who was so different.

[JH]: The way he dressed, he looked, talked, everything. You know, he was so singularly himself. And he used that.

[OP]: Yes. And when I said the problem was that MIT was a very staunch, kind of a typical "MIT guy". When I applied -- as a director of the center, I had to apply for the new fellows that I wanted to be appointed as fellows at MIT. And he looked at her and said, "Well Charlotte Moorman, is she going to take off her shirt?" That was kind of his motif, so to speak, or his motive to possibly say no. But no, he didn't have the guts to say no, and signed, and Charlotte was a fellow, okay? I mean that world was always around her, though with time -- I kind of forgot that MIT had that side, that stiff --

[JH]: Institutional decorum.

[OP]: Yeah. Institutional decorum, conventional side. It also did disappear increasingly over the years, after all, these were the years that came with a lot of change. So things did change.

[JH]: You helped change the institution.

[OP]: I hope. You're right, more art than before. Anyway, there was more art, more artists, and more instituted art programs, classes, and so on. And there was also an absolutely, quite fascinating -- and I asked Charlotte and Paik in classes.

[JH]: Oh, did Paik contribute to classes?

[OP]: Yes.

[JH]: Fantastic.

Is there anything else you'd like to add about Nam June, or any other thoughts that I haven't asked you about? His personality, his intelligence, things that he might have done that I don't know about?

[OP]: Well, the one thing that he did at the center was he performed. He really liked that the most. I never heard him give a halfway formal presentation, meaning lecture, art, performance -- anything.

[JH]: Was there anything you wish he had done or anything you wish he hadn't done?

[OP]: Not really, no. He always did something different and it was always interesting. And the center was a pretty unconventional place.

[JH]: Yes, I know.

[OP]: But not offensive or not provocative. To many people it was provocative, because the art was so senseless --

[JH]: Yes, of course.

[OP]: -- the art was so senseless. MIT has a very strong music department--

[JH]: Yes, but not a very interesting one. [laughs] Sorry.

[OP]: Well, there was John Harbison --

[JH]: But who's that composer they have that --

[OP]: Yeah. John Harbison is one of them, and some others. So these are real, kind of, academic --

[JH]: Academic composers, yes, exactly.

[OP]: And you know, lots of people like that. Many parents like that there's good music there, a good music department, so that the kids can take music classes, and music history classes, and so on and so forth. Which doesn't make them more sensitive to really surprisingly new phenomena, et cetera. So it's just more or less conventional.

[JH]: Let me ask you, Nam June passed away a number of years ago. Do you think about him still?

[OP]: Yes, I do.

[JH]: Do you miss him?

[OP]: Well, yeah, as I said there was a group of us, five or six -- oh, Christo is the name I couldn't remember.

[JH]: Oh, Christo, of course, of course. Oh my goodness. Oh my gosh. Two old men talking.

[laughter] He was very close to Nam June.

[OP]: And his wife.

[JH]: Yeah, Jean-Claude.

[OP]: My other thing was this group of five or six, or sometimes seven, we met not regularly, but somehow periodically, for dinner. [laughs] It was almost conventional.

[JH]: With Nam June?

[OP]: Yeah.

[end of transcript]